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Thirty-one days in Iran's Islamic Revolution

By Martin Sieff
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Gen. Robert "Dutch" Huyser looks so much like President Ronald "Dutch" Reagan, he is used to children exclaiming, "Look! It's the president."

But after a distinguished 40-year career in the U.S. Air Force, the general has another claim to fame. The 31 days he spent in Iran at the height of the 1979 Islamic Revolution gave him a unique insight into the new regime and American shortcomings in comprehending it.

Gen. Huyser has published a memoir of that time — "Mission to Tehran" (Harper & Row, \$20.95) — which has been widely praised for its honesty, insight and vivid writing. But he said the acclaim and interest had taken him by surprise.

"This is all new to me, this writing business. I took a terrible beating from the media in later 1979-81 when I was still on active duty, and there were the hostages. There was so much that was ill-advised that when I retired I decided to document it.

"I consulted [journalist] Drew Middleton and wrote a 767-page

draft," he said. "The purpose was to document those 31 days of history. I went over many points with the State Department, the National Security Agency and the CIA. The Department of Defense championed the cause for me. Then [British defense expert] Lord Chalfont reviewed my book, and urged me to publish it."

When asked why he had been selected for the Iranian mission, Gen. Huyser replied, "I guess I'm a dismal optimist. I don't believe in defeat till it's proven. Also, I understood the value of that part of the world."

He said he was appearing on 50 live radio talk shows and on NBC's "The Today Show" to promote the book.

Discussing the Iran-Contra arms scandal, Gen. Huyser saw a number of parallels with the 1979 crisis: a lack of cultural understanding, confusion over whom to regard as moderates in Iran, and a U.S. tendency to generalize about Iranians.

"Frequently Americans tend to imagine other people as we are. But they respond differently from us to power and psychological [expletive].

"The value of a human life is also different in Iran," he said. "Here we

debate nationally whether hardened criminals should be executed. But it doesn't seem to bother the ayatollah to send 12-year-old youths to war with the pleasing thought that when they die they'll go to heaven.

"But it would be very difficult to convince Americans of that [difference]," he added.

The Iranian attitude toward negotiations is also different from that of Americans, he said.

"We take things at face value and believe that a handshake will stand. They have a tendency to be more mercenary towards negotiations."

He suggested that U.S. negotiators with the Iranians in the arms affair should have remembered the adage "Be sure you don't give them the money until you have the men, otherwise they'll end up with both."

"It appears to me that the [Reagan] administration had no familiarity with Iran or with the psychological baggage of its people," Gen. Huyser said. "We assume they can be trusted and that their word will be good. It isn't necessarily that way.

"These dealings were disappointing to me. I just don't believe you can ever give in to random terrorists."

He predicted the Iran-Iraq war may go on for some time. "I don't believe Iraq is on the ropes, or that the Soviets will let them collapse. I've even wondered if the Soviets are orchestrating [the conflict]."

Should Iran win, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Gen. Huyser believes, would not stop.

"He would just sweep on [across the Middle East] and that concerns me," he said. "His next stop would be Lebanon and he would eventually [seek to] throw Israel into the sea."